

Professional Reading

By Cmdr. Peter B. Mersky, USNR (Ret.)

Brewster F2A Buffalo Aces of World War 2

Kari Stenman and Andrew Thomas. Botley, Oxford, U.K.: Osprey Publishing, 2010. 96 pp. Ill. \$22.95.

One of the most famous least-known fighters of the war, the portly Brewster F2A Buffalo had an unusual career among front-line aircraft during World War II. Originally built to operate from U.S. carriers, its brief career aboard ship was marked by poor performance, terribly weak landing gear, and a general reputation for falling short of expectations. Its pilots, however, liked the way it handled in the air and bemoaned the need for more horsepower and heavier armament.

The Buffalo—the name came from the British, who were fond of replacing the mundane government designations of the American aircraft and other equipment they encountered with colorful titles—was the first U.S. monoplane carrier aircraft, but has never enjoyed a book devoted to it (discounting an inadequate soft cover book of the 1960s). Its history usually can be found in abbreviated form in larger works, such as a companion volume on Finnish aces in this same Osprey series or other books devoted to Navy aircraft. Thus, this new book (No. 91 in Osprey's aces series) is especially welcome, combining the writing talents of two established experts along with a team of artists to bring the little Brewster fighter's wartime story to light.

Because of the Buffalo's extensive overseas employment, the narrative focuses on action outside American service. Flying with the British and the Finns, the Buffalo saw action in such diverse arenas as Singapore and Burma against the Japanese and over the snow-covered forests of Finland (against first the Soviets, then later the Finns' erstwhile German allies). With the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, however, the Buffalo experienced the briefest of front-line service; its only combat use in U.S. service was at the Battle of Midway in June 1942. The F2A's main adversary was the Zero, the premier naval fighter of the day. Contrary to many published reports of the time and in subsequent histories, however, the Buffalo managed to give a fairly reasonable account of itself before being overwhelmed by numbers and superiority of design.

Royal Air Force pilots managed only a few kills in the Brewster, as did Dutch pilots in the Netherlands East Indies. The book describes the hopeless defense put up by Royal Air Force Buffalos against the Japanese onslaught on Malaya. Looking at the rotund fighters, it is difficult to imagine them being able to offer a credible resistance against the cream of the Japanese Navy and Army air forces. Somehow, however, Commonwealth pilots stood their ground—at least for a while. It was the Finns who found the fighter to be an ace-maker, with 37 Finnish pilots achieving at least five kills or more. The top score of 39 kills was attributed to a Finnish Brewster pilot (as part of his overall wartime score of 75). Part of the reason for the Finns' impressive tally is attributed



An F2A-2 Brewster Buffalo with VF-2 circa 1940. The Buffalo was the U.S. Navy's first monoplane aircraft, but was quickly replaced by the more capable F4F Wildcat in early 1942. (National Naval Aviation Museum Collection)

to the fact they flew the Model 239, the export version of the Buffalo, which was some 1,500 pounds lighter than the F2A-3 equipping VMF-221 at Midway. Finnish pilots also benefited from considerable combat experience as a result of their Winter War in 1940 with the Soviet Union.

There are the obligatory tables of aces and their kills, and the cover illustration by Mark Postlethwaite, not to mention Chris Davey's outstanding profiles, are among the best I have seen in the series.

The Two Thousand Yard Stare: Tom Lea's World War II

Tom Lea. Brendan M. Greeley Jr., ed. College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2008. 228 pp. Ill. \$40.

An ambitious large-format book, this overview of one of the most well-known American combat artists of World War II presents many recognizable paintings and drawings along with less-familiar works. Combined with well-written supporting text from the artist as well as by editor Brendan Greeley, the paintings display Tom Lea's capabilities as well as the great distances and many places he visited during the war. The examples of Lea's work are shown in various media, from the pencil sketches used to prepare for his more finished studio works, to the actual final pieces that were in oil or watercolor—in all of which he was a master. Lea seemed the most involved when he was depicting people: as individuals in the cockpit of a battered fighter, on the bridge of a ship, or in the jungles of a Pacific island; or as groups relaxing on the flight line, waiting for the next mission, or suiting up for that coming flight. It is in these examples that his skills as an illustrator shine through.

Thomas Calloway Lea (1907-2001) was born and raised in El Paso, Texas. He trained as a muralist before the war, and his work included notable murals throughout the Southwest commissioned under the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. During the war, Lea achieved his greatest notoriety while as a combat artist and correspondent with *Life* magazine depicting the Pacific island campaigns. Above all, Lea was a portrait artist, and his stunning, realistic depictions of America's combat servicemen, famous and not-so-famous, are a who's who of the so-called "Greatest Generation." Often shown in a rumpled uniform and with a five-o'clock shadow on their jowls, these men appear as they fought their war. The book's title and cover come from Lea's most well-known painting—depicting the battle of Peleliu in 1944—of a shell-shocked infantryman staring into oblivion, his eyes a set of unfocused black circles showing little left underneath after all the man had seen of war.

For the aviation side, his portrait of an F4F Wildcat pilot brings the air war in close and personal. Lea also showed the rough and tough side of other aviation venues, especially the China / Burma / India Theater, most closely associated with

the Flying Tigers and the enduring Chinese people who often worked side by side with their aviator protectors. As Lea said in 1944, "China hit me right between the eyes." Besides the Pacific, he also visited the European action, producing riveting portraits of the pilots and ground crews who flew and serviced the fighters and bombers that took the war to the Germans. Like the combat participants he depicted, Lea's tour up front left him with his own demons. He may not have fired weapons, but he saw the war for what it was: brutal, bloody, and utterly relentless.

This large book is an excellent compilation and well deserving of being included in anyone's library.

The Martin P5M Patrol Seaplane

Capt. Richard Hoffman, USN (Ret.). Simi Valley, Calif.: Steve Ginter, 2007. 169 pp. Ill. \$34.95.

Number 74 in Steve Ginter's Naval Fighter series, this book gives a mainly pictorial look at the last U.S. Navy flying boat to see squadron service, the P5M Marlin. Appearing just after World War II, this large twin-engine "boat" was a development of the earlier PBM Mariner, dispensing with the Mariner's twin-tail layout. The Marlin saw service with a number of U.S. squadrons, as well as with France's Aeronavale.

Serving throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, the P5M (designated P-5 after 1962) saw limited combat duty in the first half of the Vietnam War. The last aircraft retired in November 1967, with VP-40. The lack of details about the P-5's Vietnam service is disappointing, and that story remains to be written.

Following the series' established format, this book includes lots of photos, mostly black and white (except for the two outside covers), as well as a number of NATOPS and maintenance manual pages and brief descriptions of each squadron. There is also the regular discussion of model kits of the subject aircraft, which appears to be limited to only one, a good one by the Japanese company Hasegawa.



A Martin P5M-1 Marlin with VP-42 circa 1958. Marlins were the last "flying boats" to serve in the U.S. Navy.